

Embellishing the Steps: Elements of Presentation and Style in *The Heavenly Ladder* of John Climacus

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The Sinai Peninsula, a bleak and barren wilderness jutting into the northern end of the Red Sea, acted like a magnet from Early Christian times, attracting to its solitude men and women earnestly engaged in the struggle to save their eternal souls. In the religious sphere the special mark of the place was its association with Moses and his meetings with God. It was here, near the elevation known as Mt. Sinai, that the future prophet came face to face with the divine and received the charge to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage;¹ it was on the summit of Mt. Sinai that Moses later accepted into his hands the tablets of God's law.² The primordial contacts between heaven and earth were to dominate the image of the location—a holy ground to the Jew, Christian, and Muslim—for the rest of time.

In the second half of the sixth century, when the Byzantine Empire reached its greatest extent, Justinian I ordered to be constructed, near the foot of Mt. Sinai and on the traditional site of the burning bush, one of his great and lasting monuments, the monastery of St. Catherine, originally intended to double as a fortress at this strategic point in the region. Over the course of its long history the spiritual foundation, in addition to housing an active community of religious men, became a rich repository for works of Christian art, principally in the form of icons, books, and sacred vessels. The building complex and other glories of the monastery were for the first time explored and systematically examined in this century, during the joint Princeton-Michigan-Alexandrian expeditions to Sinai in 1958, 1960, 1963, and 1965.³

Among the book treasures housed in the library, and represented by numerous copies

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¹Exod. 3:1–12.

²Exod. 20:1–17, 31:18.

³For a brief summary of the history of the Sinai expeditions, see the preface to G. H. Forsyth et al., *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Church and Fortress of Justinian* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1973), 1–4. An accessible and informative account of the expeditions was also published by two of the leaders, George H. Forsyth and Kurt Weitzmann, in *National Geographic* 125 (1964): 83–127.

in the collection, is an indigenous Sinai product, variously known in English as *The Heavenly Ladder* or *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, a recognized classic of human spirituality that has had a wide influence throughout the Orthodox world.⁴

What is known for sure about the author of the work is very little indeed. *The Heavenly Ladder*, as far as the record shows, is the only book he wrote. His name was John, and he was destined to be given, for an obvious reason, the surname Climax or Climacus. He was the *hegoumenos* of St. Catherine's, most likely in the first half of the seventh century when he was already advanced in age.⁵ Even if the designation *scholastikos*, assigned to him in the title of a *vita* of uncertain date, is genuine, it probably means no more than that he was a learned individual.⁶ The *Ladder* itself had a modest enough beginning, coming into existence in response to a request from the abbot of the nearby monastery of Raithou, who asked Climacus to put together a spiritual guide for the members of that community. Ostensibly intended for a local audience in the Sinai Peninsula, the work of Climacus made its way well beyond those borders, reaching monasteries and private homes in numerous lands and many languages throughout the Middle Ages and into modern times. The fate of the *Ladder* in several different cultures would constitute separate chapters in the history of the work's travels and influence.⁷

Within the Greek manuscript tradition, additional material was picked up along the way: an index of the thirty chapters with a short introduction and epilogue; the *vita* of Climacus by Daniel of Raithou, already mentioned; anecdotes about his life; marginal scholia; and illustrations ranging from one or two miniatures to full cycles of pictures. Without questioning in any way the interest and importance of the various elements attached to the later Climacus, especially the illustrations⁸ and the marginal comments,⁹

⁴Among the best general introductions to this work, with relevant bibliographies, are G. Couilleau, s.v. "Jean Climaque," *DSp* 8:369–89; K. Ware, introduction to *John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. C. Luibheid and N. Russell (New York, 1982), 1–70; J. Chrysavgis, *Ascent to Heaven: The Theology of the Human Person according to Saint John of the Ladder* (Brookline, Mass., 1989); and M. Heppell, introduction to *St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. L. Moore (London, 1959), 13–33. Of fundamental importance is D. Bogdanović, *Jovan Lestvichnik u vizantijskoj i staroj srpskoj knjizhevosti* (*Jean Climaque dans la littérature byzantine et la littérature serbe ancienne*) (Belgrade, 1968), in Serbo-Croatian with French summary.

⁵The question of Climacus's approximate dates has not been—and, due to the lack of hard evidence, is not likely to be—finally settled. Most scholars nowadays, however, would probably be willing to agree that his death occurred at a time not far distant from the year 650. One of the more intriguing theories about the course of his life was developed by L. Petit, s.v. "Jean Climaque," in *DTC* 8.1:690–93, who argued that Climacus, before he became a monk at a late stage, had been a married man with a professional career. The hypothesis, though reasonably supported by several concrete arguments, clashes head-on with the import of a passage in the *Ladder* itself (*S. Giovanni Climaco: Scala paradisi*, ed. P. Trevisan, 2 vols. [Turin, 1941], 2:157–59 [hereafter Trevisan]) where the wording seems clearly to imply that he had been a monk already in his early years (ἐπὶ νεότητι αὐτοῦ). In one of the stories attributed to Anastasius of Sinai, in F. Nau, "Le texte grec des récits du moine Anastase sur les saints pères du Sinai," *OC* 2 (1902): 58–89 (the account is at pp. 63–64, no. 6), it is claimed that John was tonsured at the age of twenty.

⁶The *vita* is written by the monk Daniel from the monastery of Raithou, and its historical value has been seriously questioned by scholars; the text is included in all editions of the *Ladder*.

⁷The main lines of the work's spread and influence are succinctly laid out by Couilleau, "Jean Climaque," 381–88.

⁸Comprehensively studied in the book of J. R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus* (Princeton, N.J., 1954). For a detailed and instructive investigation into the production of one of the most prominent illuminated copies the reader is referred to K. Corrigan, "Constantine's Problems: The Making of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus, Vat. gr. 394," *Word and Image* 12.1 (1996): 1–33.

⁹Given the absence of a critical edition of the main text, it is not surprising that the mass of scholia and marginal comments has never been thoroughly sifted.

for the purposes of this study of presentation and style I concentrate largely on the original documents that passed hands, so to speak, between the two monastic superiors, John of Raithou and John Climacus. There are four documents in question:¹⁰ (1) the letter of the abbot of Raithou entreating his friend to write a book of spiritual guidance; (2) the letter of reply by Climacus; (3) the *Ladder* itself; and (4) the short treatise at the end of the *Ladder* known as the “Homily to the Pastor” (Πρὸς τὸν ποιμένα λόγος), the guidance written specifically for the superior of a monastic community and addressed directly to the abbot of Raithou. It is entirely understandable that the third document—the thirty chapters of the *Ladder*—is usually, and often exclusively, the focus of attention in discussions of Climacus’s work. It needs to be stressed, however, that from the point of view of literary production the other three pieces should be treated as smaller but not insignificant parts of the same enterprise. Therefore, before moving to the *Ladder* proper in the second part of the article, I spend some time dealing with the front and back material, that is, the exchange of letters at the beginning and the “Homily to the Pastor” at the end.

In writing to Climacus the abbot of Raithou remarks that he was encouraged by the words of Moses, “Ask thy father and he will tell thee, thy elders and they will inform thee.”¹¹ He is now humbly approaching Climacus, he explains, as father, elder, and exceptional teacher, asking him to become a second Moses; he wants him, as one who has been to the mountain and seen the vision, to prepare a set of “God-inspired tablets” for the instruction of the new Israelites who have left the world and taken up the monastic life. He is not trying to flatter but is simply repeating what is well known. He therefore hopes to receive soon those words of guidance inscribed on tablets that will point the way unerringly and become a ladder leading those who have chosen the angelic state up to the gates of heaven. If Jacob, a herder of mere sheep, he goes on, was able to experience an awesome vision of the ladder, surely the head of a spiritual flock can be expected to provide not just a vision, but a secure path up to God.¹² This is the gist of the letter from Raithou, and it not only provides the first impetus for the book’s composition, but also introduces two ideas that will be important from the point of view of its presentation, namely, the general overarching notion of Moses as the medium for the delivery of God’s law, and the particular image, itself from the Mosaic Book of Genesis, of the ladder, seen by Jacob, set up between heaven and earth.¹³

The letter of reply by Climacus is a good rhetorical match for the abbot’s epistle.¹⁴ John of Raithou, with typical monastic humility, had approached as a suppliant, presenting himself in the most lowly guise: a sinner before an angelic spiritual father, an ignorant person before a talented, inspired teacher and paragon of virtue. Climacus, in response, deftly tosses the ball back with the depictions reversed: himself ignorant, poor in virtue, and a mere learner, his correspondent an exemplar of dispassion, purity of heart, and humility, the best of teachers whose mind is illuminated by divine light. However, afraid of offending the mother of all virtues, holy obedience, he has decided to accept the com-

¹⁰They are transmitted together in most of the main manuscripts and printed versions. Throughout this article we cite the text of these documents according to the two-volume Italian edition of Trevisan, *S. Giovanni Climaco: Scala paradisi*.

¹¹Deut. 32:7.

¹²Trevisan, 1:31–33.

¹³Gen. 28:12–17.

¹⁴Trevisan, 1:35–39.

mand of a moral superior. But, he cautions, the treatise he is sending for the community at Raithou is only a poor sketch which his better, the true artist, must bring to completion and embellish. It should be pointed out that Climacus makes no mention of the ladder in his letter; on the other hand, he does accept, however uneagerly, the role of Moses. And that reluctance itself is fully in character, since the original Moses was also very slow to accept the mission of leading the Israelites and mounted a series of objections to the Lord. One of them was prompted by a conviction of his own inadequacy: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?”¹⁵ Another stemmed from his alleged lack of eloquence, and on that basis he succeeded in having his brother Aaron, a more talented speaker, made his spokesman.

With regard to the “Homily to the Pastor,”¹⁶ the first observation to be made about a document that is rarely given equal time with the regular chapters of the *Ladder* is that Climacus himself treats it as part of the larger work; that much is clear from the opening words addressed to the abbot of Raithou: “In this earthly book I have put you in the very last place.” Set up along the same lines as the preceding thirty chapters, it is intended specifically for the abbot in his capacity as leader of a community, since, as Climacus had already indicated in the prefatory letter, it would be most inappropriate to send to a master a work intended for learners. However, even taking this special approach Climacus is uncomfortable, as he openly confesses. “But, father of fathers,” he says, “even as I send this to you I am afraid of hearing those words, ‘You who instruct others, do you not instruct yourself?’ So when I have said one last thing, I will bring this discourse to a close.”¹⁷

The “one last thing,” in the event, turns out to be a complex and occasionally eloquent climax in which the ever reluctant Moses, now using the author’s advantage and seizing the last word, takes off his mantle of the prophet, so to speak, and places it in its full glory on his fellow *hegoumenos* instead. John of Raithou is depicted as the abbot whose soul has already been illuminated and has achieved unity with God. He is colorfully portrayed as the “guide of guides” (ὁδηγὸς ὁδηγῶν)¹⁸ of his brother monks and, in an elaborate metaphor, is put through each of the major episodes of the Mosaic epic, including the ascent, the vision of God, and the descent to Horeb, whence, glorified in soul and body, he carries back to his people “the tablets of knowledge and of the ascent” (τὰς πλάκας τῆς γνώσεως καὶ τῆς ἀναβάσεως).¹⁹ In this conception/conceit, John of Raithou is the true Moses and the paragon of monastic virtue who needs no spiritual guidance from another. Even as author of the *Ladder* Climacus is content to cast himself as the great prophet’s mere mouthpiece, a second Aaron, and, he insists, a very poor one at that. Then, in a closing compliment, Climacus reverts to the image of the ladder of virtues and here too credits the other, as a skilled architect, with providing “the foundation, or rather the completion” for the book.²⁰ The two words used, θεμέλιον and πλήρωμα, are without doubt multivalent and suggestive, and they are not meant to indicate precise

¹⁵Exod. 3:11.

¹⁶Trevisan, 2:322–77.

¹⁷Ibid., 363.

¹⁸Ibid., 367.

¹⁹Ibid., 369.

²⁰Ibid., 375.

contributions. The field of ideas includes the abbot's original request to compose the guide, the winning over of a reluctant author, and the provision of an exemplary life to serve as a model. Moreover, it may not be stretching things too far to see in the two words a reference to the literary "beginning" and "end" as supplied by the letter from John of Raithou and the "Homily to the Pastor" addressed to him. In another sense, the πλήρωμα is also what comes after the last step has been climbed: it is the summit of virtue where the soul is made one with love, which is God. And this is precisely how John of Raithou is depicted in the final paragraph of the "Homily."

If, therefore, while recognizing the *Ladder* of thirty steps as the central work of the author, we take into account the three surrounding documents as well, we will then be restoring the full context of the composition and in that way looking at a rhetorical whole. From this perspective it becomes clear that John Climacus had two main metaphors in his mind's eye at the time of writing, Jacob's ladder on the one hand, and Moses on the other; and while the figure of Moses is especially prominent in the front and back material, it also, in a real sense, hovers over the entire enterprise. The importance of the image for the original scheme is confirmed incidentally in two other ways worth at least a passing mention. In the *vita* written by the monk Daniel, transmitted in even the earliest manuscripts of the *Ladder*, Climacus is portrayed as a "New Moses" who after a vision on Mt. Sinai produced τὰς θεογράφους αὐτοῦ πλάκας.²¹ Secondly, among the *Narratives* attributed to Anastasius of Sinai there is a charming anecdote that relates how, on the day on which John was installed as *hegoumenos* at Sinai, a group of six hundred guests was entertained to a meal at the monastery. As they ate, Climacus noticed a certain individual with short hair and dressed in Jewish fashion busily going around and giving orders to the cooks and various servants. Afterwards, when the servants themselves sat down to eat and the individual could not be located to join them, the narrative informs us: "Our holy father John said to us, 'Let him be. There is nothing strange in the fact that the lord Moses came to serve at his own place.'"²²

Furthermore, the prominence of the Mosaic image in the original configuration may not be unconnected with the issue of the work's name, which has never been fully clarified. We have no critical edition of Climacus, all current versions depending on the 1633 text prepared by the Jesuit Matthew Rader, and there is not likely to be one anytime soon, given the enormous number of manuscripts involved. A very preliminary look at some of the oldest surviving copies from Sinai and Istanbul (of the tenth and eleventh centuries)²³ reveals three possible contenders for the original Greek title: (1) Κλίμαξ θείας ἀνόδου, or "Ladder of Divine Ascent"; (2) Πλάκες πνευματικάι, or "Spiritual Tablets"; and (3) Λόγος ἀσκητικός, or "Ascetic Discourse." It may well be that, of the three, Πλάκες

²¹ Ibid., 1:17–19.

²² Included, as part of the transmitted material, in Trevisan, 1:19–21; see also Nau, "Le texte grec des récits," 64, no. 7. In addition, two other Anastasian stories (Nau, *ibid.*, nos. 32 and 34) refer specifically to the idea of the new or second Moses.

²³ I have examined microfilms of Sinai gr. 421 (9th/10th century), Sinai gr. 417 (10th century), and Istanbul, Ecumen. Patr. 126 [134] (11th century). Descriptions of the Sinai manuscripts will be found in the catalogue of V. Gardthausen, *Catalogus codicum graecorum Sinaiticorum* (Oxford, 1886), 100–101; for Sinai gr. 417, there is also a full account in Martin, *Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder*, 186–87. For the Istanbul copy, see A. Tsakopoulos, Περιγραφικός κατάλογος τῶν χειρογράφων τῆς βιβλιοθήκης τοῦ Οἰκουμενικοῦ Πατριαρχείου, 2, Τμήμα χειρογράφων 'Ι. Μονῆς Ἀγ. Τριάδος Χάλκης (Istanbul, 1956), 153–54.

πνευματικαί is the strongest candidate. For one thing, it is prominently displayed, in decorated frames, in a number of the earliest illustrated copies. For another, it is the only one of the three aspirants in whose company the word *title* is used. In the oldest extant manuscripts, among the front matter we read: Πρόλογος τοῦ λόγου οὗ ἐπωνυμία πλάκες πνευματικαί (“Prologue to the work entitled ‘Spiritual Tablets’”).²⁴

The idea of Moses and the tablets is uniquely appropriate for the place of composition, and it served Climacus for other purposes as well. On a superficial level it allowed him considerable scope for the rhetorical game, which he played to the hilt, in both prologue and epilogue, with his friend from Raithou. And deeper down it gave the treatise itself an aura of inspired teaching and a sense of authority, which in no way interfered with the author’s pious wish to be considered a mere mouthpiece of a higher power.

For all of its importance, however, to Climacus’s original conception and presentation, the Mosaic metaphor was destined to be dominated by its companion, the ladder metaphor.

The ladder image, more visually compelling for a start, was in any case used for a substantially different purpose. Though not the only structural principle in operation in the work, this device, with its thirty steps, supplies a definite, if somewhat lightly attached, framework. It is true that the text of Climacus, as laid out, does not show anything like a strict hierarchical progression from one spiritual step to the next; however, it is not quite fair to conclude, as is sometimes done, that the presentation of vices and virtues is unsystematic. In fact, as Gueric Couilleau has demonstrated,²⁵ there is a surprisingly high degree of pattern to be detected in groups of steps and some subtle thematic correspondences between groups and individual topics within them. One might call this logical or even theological order, because it is based on doctrinal content. Since this article concerns almost exclusively the literary side of the work, there is no need to pursue this line further and it will have been enough to mention in passing the convincing analysis of the French scholar.

Instead I briefly consider a different aspect of system and order, highlighting the idea that Climacus was very conscious, for literary as well as doctrinal purposes, of drawing attention at the beginning or end of topics to the sequence between them. Order (τάξις), sequence (ἀκολουθία), and other closely related terms figure prominently in the border areas between steps. A few specific examples illustrate this point. At the end of the fourth step, the very long chapter on Obedience, and just before the fifth step, on Repentance,

²⁴As printed in Trevisan, 1:41. The decorated framing device appears in, among other copies, Princeton Garrett 16, fol. 8v (for a detailed description of the manuscript, see Martin, *Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder*, 175–77); Sinai gr. 417, fol. 4r (ibid., 186–87); and Paris Coislin gr. 263, fol. 7r (ibid., 172–74).

With regard to the image of Moses, it should not be forgotten that ever since the 6th century monks at Sinai, whenever they looked up at the apse mosaic in their basilica, saw depicted two pivotal episodes from the prophet’s career, namely, the epiphany at the burning bush and the reception of the tablets.

The question of the “original” title is a complicated one, and the remarks made here do not pretend to offer any kind of final solution. The issue might have been resolved by the find in St. Catherine’s, less than a quarter of a century ago, of the earliest witness to the text of Climacus—six folios in late biblical uncial script dating from the 7th or 8th century. From the little information so far made available it would appear that the title section is not among the surviving fragments; see L. Politis, “Nouveaux manuscrits grecs de Mont Sinai,” *Scriptorium* 34 (1980): 5–17, esp. 9.

²⁵“Jean Climaque,” 373–74.

begins, the author supplies these closing words: ὁ ἀθλητὴς στήκε τρέχων ἀφόβως· προέδραμέ ποτε Πέτρου Ἰωάννης· προτέτακται δὲ νῦν ὑπακοὴ μετανοίας· ὁ μὲν γὰρ προλαβὼν ὑπακοῆς, ὁ δὲ ἕτερος μετανοίας τύπον καθέστηκεν.²⁶ Here Climacus uses one of his favorite images—the monk as an athlete involved in a *dromos*—to lead into a Gospel reference (John 20:4) where John the Evangelist is reported to have outrun Peter to the tomb of Christ; this, in turn, is offered as the reason why the presentation of Obedience precedes the chapter on Repentance, John being the symbol of the one and Peter the symbol of the other. The opening words of the sixth step, on Remembrance of Death, provide a similar, if less elaborate, type of rationale for its particular position in relation to the chapter on Mourning that follows: παντὸς λόγου προηγείται ἔννοια. μνήμη δὲ θανάτου καὶ πταισμάτων προηγείται κλαυθμοῦ καὶ πένθους· διὸ κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν τάξιν καὶ ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τέθεται.²⁷ And the placing in turn of the eighth step, on Placidity and Meekness, after Mourning is explained in this way: ὥσπερ ὕδατος ἐν φλογὶ κατὰ μικρὸν προστιθεμένου τελείως ἢ φλὸξ ἀποσβέννυται, οὕτω καὶ τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ πένθους τὸ δάκρυον πᾶσαν τὴν φλόγα τοῦ θυμοῦ καὶ ὀξύχολίας ἀποκτείνειν πέφυκε· διὸ αὐτὸ καὶ ἀκολούθως τετάχαμεν.²⁸

Those instances will have shown that one is dealing with a style of ordering that is not internally generated and based on doctrine, but is rather externally imposed and inspired by creative imagination. It is a kind of sequencing that one would be justified in labelling rhetorical order, in the sense that it has more to do with embellishment than with logic; it could be regarded as a type of decorated bordering added to prettify the presentation.

This feature is by no means unique to Climacus. It is also found in at least one of the works of a contemporary writer, Sophronius of Jerusalem, who will be brought into the discussion later on as well. One of his more substantial productions is *The Miracles of Cyrus and John*, an account of seventy cures performed by the two saints in their shrine at Menouthis in Egypt.²⁹ In this text Sophronius is extremely attentive to matters of presentation, whether it be the careful arrangement of groups of miracles along geographic or other lines, or the smoothing out of the crossing from one miracle account to the next. The method of transition is reminiscent of Climacus, and a few examples will suffice to indicate that the same type of imposed order and sequence is at work. The subject of miracle 14, Θεόπεμπος, is said at the outset to appear in an appropriate se-

²⁶Trevisan, 1:203 = Luibheid and Russell (as above, note 4), 120–21: “Keep running, athlete, and do not be afraid. Once John outran Peter, and now obedience is placed before repentance. For the one who arrived first represents obedience, the other repentance.”

In giving translations for passages of the *Ladder* proper, I generally follow the version of Luibheid and Russell, with occasional modifications.

²⁷Trevisan, 1:243 = Luibheid and Russell, 132: “As thought comes before speech, so the remembrance of death and of sin comes before weeping and mourning. It is therefore appropriate to deal now with this theme.”

²⁸Trevisan, 1:287 = Luibheid and Russell, 146: “As the gradual pouring of water on a fire puts out the flame completely, so the tears of genuine mourning can extinguish every flame of anger and irascibility. Hence this comes next in our sequence.”

There is an interesting discussion of the bridging between chapters involving both the image and the text in Corrigan, “Constantine’s Problems,” 20 and 21; the artist made a conscious effort to improvise connections even in cases where the layout of the text presented difficulties.

²⁹For the critical edition, following an analysis and study of the miracles, see N. Fernández Marcos, *Los Thaumata de Sofronio: Contribución al estudio de la incubatio cristiana* (Madrid, 1975).

quence (ἀκολουθίαν εὐράμενος εὐκαιρον) because in following Ἡλίας of number 13 he preserves the alphabetical order,³⁰ and Ἰωάννης of miracle 15 receives similar praise for the same reason.³¹ Miracle 27, the story of one Theodore, is said to follow nicely on number 26, which concerns a woman called Theodora.³² On a more playful level, Paul the pauper, the subject of miracle 18, is credited with knowing where to take his place in the sequence: he comes after the wealthy John of number 17, just as a beggar goes after a rich man in the marketplace.³³ From the foregoing it should be clear that the attention paid to order and sequence by the two writers is informed by a similar spirit and is in the nature of artistic enhancement meant to contribute to the neatness of the presentation.

It is time now to direct our attention to individual steps of the *Ladder* and to focus on aspects of its literary style. The separate chapters, like the work as a whole, do not reveal an immediately obvious structure, but nevertheless allow the careful reader to discern a general pattern. Various scholars (primarily Dimitrije Bogdanović, Couilleau, and Kallistos Ware)³⁴ have proposed a number of slightly different solutions. I myself would present the following pattern. In many of the steps one finds these four elements: (1) a brief introductory statement; (2) concise definitions of a virtue or a vice; (3) a general discussion of the theme of the step combining exegesis, admonition, illustrative stories, and personal observations; and (4) a short formulaic closing statement. If this grid does not fit snugly onto every chapter taken at random, the explanation is that Climacus will not allow himself to be held to either a large overall scheme or anything like a fixed pattern in the individual steps. And much the same could be said of his writing style, one of the special attractions of the work: it is unpredictable and can swing, in the turning of a page, from finely crafted definitions that have a hint of poetry to the pedestrian prose of instruction that reads like school lecture notes, from striking metaphors and images that have all the simplicity and earthiness of a Homeric simile to passages of enigma and obscure allusion. The multiple facets of the work's style have been admirably identified and discussed by Bogdanović in a separate chapter of his book on Climacus,³⁵ and there is no need to repeat his findings, but it may be useful to examine more closely a few of the larger elements of style and to advance the consideration of the topic one or two paces further than has been done in the past.

Some of the more remarkable features of Climacus's prose style, it can be argued, resemble closely the qualities that one associates with certain types of Byzantine liturgical writing, in particular the sermon. The sermon here should be taken in a broad sense, to include the metrical homily of Eastern origin, the *kontakion*, that was very popular in the sixth and seventh centuries. The three elements isolated for examination here are poetic quality, litany structure, and drama. A series of texts serve to illustrate various aspects of these features.

Our first extract is an example of one of the two main kinds of definition to be found

³⁰ Ibid., 271.

³¹ Ibid., 272.

³² Ibid., 292.

³³ Ibid., 277.

³⁴ See Bogdanović, *Jovan Lestvichnik*, 221; Couilleau, "Jean Climaque," 374; and Ware, introduction to *John Climacus*, 13.

³⁵ *Jovan Lestvichnik*, chap. 5, esp. pp. 127–45.

in a typical step of the *Ladder*, that is to say, a single long period or sentence consisting of a chain of descriptive phrases, which have been rearranged here in order to show the structure as built by the successive members, or cola, of the sentence.

- πονηρία ἐστὶν
 εὐθύτητος ἐναλλαγή
 πεπλανημένη ἔννοια
 οἰκονομία ψευδομένη
 (5) κεκολασμένοι ὅρκοι
 συμπεπλεγμένοι λόγοι
 βυθὸς καρδίας
 ἄβυσσος δόλου
 πεποιωμένον ψεῦδος
 (10) φυσικὴ λοιπὸν οἷσις
 ταπεινώσεως ἀντίπαλος
 μετανοίας ὑπόκρισις
 πένθους μικρυσμὸς
 ἐξομολογήσεως ἔχθρα
 (15) ἰδιογνωμόρυθος
 πτωμάτων πρόξενος
 ἀναστάσεως ἀντίθετος
 ὕβρεων μειδιασμὸς
 μεμωραμένη κατήφεια
 (20) ἐπίπλαστος εὐλάβεια
 δαιμονιώδης βίος

This is Climacus's definition of πονηρία (wickedness or depravity) from the twenty-fourth step.³⁶ One can see that every phrase, with one main exception, is composed of either two nouns, or a noun and an adjective, in juxtaposition. Each colon is independent and makes a complete statement with two words, one of which carries the chief burden of description. We may call this poetic compression and power, with everything but the essentials stripped away. For example, the nouns λόγοι (6) and ψεῦδος (9) are reasonably simple and straightforward. It is left to the loaded adjectives to convey the special meaning and nuance intended by the author: συμπεπλεγμένοι λόγοι suggests words that are interwoven, complicated, subtle, and therefore deliberately misleading; πεποιωμένον ψεῦδος is falseness that has become a quality, a ποιόν or ποιότης, in other words, falseness or deception that has developed into a habit. In general, the vocabulary is chosen with deliberate care for its suggestiveness and figurative power, and attention is paid to the sound created. In at least three instances a conscious effort is made to create parallel and balanced phrases. κεκολασμένοι ὅρκοι (5) and συμπεπλεγμένοι λόγοι (6) match each other in a number of ways: the type of words and their order (participle + noun); the gender, number and, case endings; the number of syllables in each phrase; and, last but not least, the exact correspondence in the pattern of unaccented and accented syllables (~ ~ ~ x ~ x ~).³⁷ The following lines, βυθὸς καρδίας/ἄβυσσος δόλου (7–8), are also artfully composed, with the use of βυθὸς and ἄβυσσος opposite each other, the match in syllable count, and

³⁶Trevisan, 2:85.

³⁷The sign x is used here to indicate a stressed syllable; and ~, to denote an unstressed syllable. In this extract, the same rhythm appears also in πεποιωμένον ψεῦδος (9) and δαιμονιώδης βίος (21).

the same rhythm (x ~) at the end. Similarly, in the case of the pair *πτωμάτων πρόξενος/ἀναστάσεως ἀντίθετος* (16–17) one may point to certain artistic elements, such as alliteration or the opposing of the words beginning with *πρό-* and *ἀντί-* and used in combination with two other concepts that are diametrically opposed (sin and resurrection), as well as the balance in the end rhythm (x ~ ~).

The few elements of phrase-end rhythm and balance in the extract just examined are a far cry from the full patterns of accented and unaccented syllables that characterize poetry like the *kontakion*, and it would be easy to claim that such traces are purely accidental in Climacus. However, there are numerous sections of the *Ladder*, and by no means confined to definitions, in which features of this kind are in evidence.³⁸ Here are four sample pieces from three different chapters:

- A. εἴ τις κόσμον ἐμίσησε, (x ~) x ~ ~ x ~ ~
οὗτος λύπην διέφυγεν· (x ~) x ~ ~ x ~ ~
προσπάθειαν κέκτηται, x ~ ~ x ~ ~
οὐδέπω λύπης λελύτρωται.³⁹ x ~ ~ x ~ ~
- B. ἡσυχαστής ἐστὶν ὁ βοήσας ἐναργῶς x ~ ~ ~ x
“Ετοίμη ἡ καρδιά μου ὁ θεός.” x ~ ~ ~ x
ἡσυχαστής ἐστὶν ἐκεῖνος ὁ εἰπών x ~ ~ ~ x
“Εγὼ καθεύδω καὶ ἡ καρδιά μου ἀγρυπνεῖ.” x ~ ~ ~ x
κλεῖε
μὲν θύραν κέλλης σώματι (~ x ~) x ~ x ~ ~
καὶ θύραν γλώσσης φθέγματι (~ x ~) x ~ x ~ ~
καὶ ἔνδον πύλιν πνεύματι⁴⁰ (~ x ~) x ~ x ~ ~
- C. ὁ μὲν ἀθυμῶν νήχεται ὕδασιν, (~ ~ ~ ~ x) x ~ ~ x ~ ~
ὁ δὲ ἀκηδιῶν φύρεται πλήθει⁴¹ (~ ~ ~ ~ x) x ~ ~ x ~ ~
- D. θύρα
γὰρ τοῦ προτέρου τὰ πλήθη τῶν τραυμάτων, (~ ~ ~ x ~ ~) x ~ ~ ~ x ~
τοῦ δὲ δευτέρου ὁ πλοῦτος τῶν καμάτων⁴² (~ ~ ~ x ~ ~) x ~ ~ ~ x ~

If one considers the line endings and the area marked off by, and including, the last two accented syllables, a lot of parallelism is evident. The pattern in texts A and C (the so-called double dactyl, x ~ ~ x ~ ~), it should be remarked, is a very common end rhythm both in *kontakia* and in highly rhetorical Byzantine prose texts, and examples are indicated in the hymn extracts cited below.⁴³ Further, in passages A, B, and D there are occurrences of complete cola that are fully balanced in rhythm; this is almost the case in C as well, and one slight piece of “metrical” license would take care of the extra syllable in the second line. But apart from the pattern of accented and unaccented syllables, one

³⁸Bogdanović has already, using other parts of the *Ladder*, stressed its rhythmic and poetic qualities; see *Jovan Lestvichnik*, 142–45. Cf. French summary: “Les figures sonores donnent un effet puissant de rythme et la prose de Jean Climaque se transforme souvent en prose rythmée voire en vrai poème” (p. 222).

³⁹Trevisan, 1:75.

⁴⁰Ibid., 2:235.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 41.

⁴³For rhythm in Byzantine prose texts, which is normally confined to the phrase ending, or clausula, the reader is referred to the classic study by W. Hörandner, *Der Prosarhythmus in der rhetorischen Literatur der Byzantiner* (Vienna, 1981). On the high frequency of the double-dactyl form, see *ibid.*, 27, 42.

also notes in C and D another element of correspondence, the clear signs of assonance and rhyme, while in A and B one finds instances of homoeoteleuton. Once again one is reminded of the *kontakion*.

Consistent rhyme and assonance are not a usual feature of Byzantine poetry until much later in the Middle Ages; even in Romanos only one part of one hymn has, as we might say, serious signs of these characteristics, namely, the third strophe (vv. 6–13) of the second *kontakion* on Joseph:

ἦν μὲν ἀγαθὴ τοῦ δεσπότου ἡ εὐνοία,	(x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
ἄχρηστος δὲ λίκαν ἡ ταύτης διάνοια·	(x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
ἔστεργε διὰ σεμνότητα ὁ ἀνὴρ τὸν Ἰωσήφ,	
ἔθελγε διὰ φαυλότητα ἡ γυνὴ τὸν εὐγενῆ·	
ἔτερπε μὲν ἐκείνον ἡ ὀρθότης τοῦ τρόπου,	
ἔτρωσε δὲ ἐκείνην ὡραιότης προσώπου·	
οὗτος αὐτῷ τὸν οἶκον παρέδωκεν,	(x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
αὕτη αἰσχροῦς τὸ σῶμα προέδωκεν. ⁴⁴	(x ~ ~ x ~ ~)

In particular, the two lines starting with ἔτερπε μὲν ἐκείνον show not only the complete matching in accent patterns (as required), but also much correspondence in sounds at the beginning and the end of words. Still, for the feature in full—and almost unique—bloom, one must go to the anonymous *Akathistos Hymn*, which most scholars would assign to either the sixth or the seventh century:

Χαῖρε, δι' ἧς ἡ χαρὰ ἐκλάμπει·	
χαῖρε, δι' ἧς ἡ ἀρὰ ἐκλείψει·	
χαῖρε, τοῦ πεσόντος Ἀδὰμ ἡ ἀνάκλησις·	(x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
χαῖρε, τῶν δακρύων τῆς Εὐας ἡ λύτρωσις·	(x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
χαῖρε, ὕψος δυσανάβατον ἀνθρωπίνους λογισμοῖς·	
χαῖρε, βάθος δυσθεώρητον καὶ ἀγγέλων ὀφθαλμοῖς·	
χαῖρε, ὅτι ὑπάρχεις βασιλέως καθέδρα·	
χαῖρε, ὅτι βαστάζεις τὸν βαστάζοντα πάντα·	
χαῖρε, ἀστήρ ἐμφαίνων τὸν ἥλιον·	(x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
χαῖρε, γαστήρ ἐνθέου σαρκώσεως·	(x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
χαῖρε, δι' ἧς νεουργεῖται ἡ κτίσις·	
χαῖρε, δι' ἧς προσκυνεῖται ὁ πλάστης	
χαῖρε, νύμφη ἀνύμφευτε. ⁴⁵	(x ~ ~ x ~ ~)

The sample before us is the first of the twelve structurally identical thirteen-line units in the poem, each displaying a high degree of rhyme and sound correspondence. One need go no further than the first two lines of this particular unit to see a good illustration of these elements, and there is a rich display of matching and contrasting in the third couplet as well. Two further points are worth mentioning in passing: the deliberate positioning of ὕψος and βάθος opposite each other in that couplet is similar to, though more effective than, Climacus's βυθὸς καρδίας/ἄβυσσος δόλου, which we have already discussed;⁴⁶ and the type of two-word paradox in the refrain of the last line (νύμφη ἀνύμφευτε) is a device that Climacus likes as well. Two good examples would be ἀνήδονος

⁴⁴P. Maas and C. A. Trypanis, eds., *Sancti Romani Melodi cantica* (Oxford, 1963), no. 44, 356–57.

⁴⁵C. A. Trypanis, *Fourteen Early Byzantine Cantica* (Vienna, 1968), no. 1, 30.

⁴⁶Above, p. 9.

repetition of the phrase ὁ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ helps to build up the positive side of the notion of monastic detachment, to counterbalance the whole series of material and emotional attachments from which the aspiring monk is called to cut himself loose.

Sophronius of Jerusalem, a contemporary of Climacus who spent ten years in one of the monasteries of the Sinai Peninsula, is another writer who is very fond of this rhetorical arrangement in his prose writings. The extracts below, taken from two of his sermons, are, like those of Climacus, presented here according to the colon structure, which is easy to detect in the case of Sophronius, since one of the identifying marks of his style is that every unit ends in a double-dactyl rhythm. For present purposes, the device of repetition speaks for itself, and a couple of words of additional comment will suffice.

1. χαίροις, ὦ χαρᾶς τῆς ὑπερουρανίου γεννήτρια· (x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
 χαίροις, ὦ χαρᾶς τῆς ὑπερτάτου μαιεύτρια· (x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
 χαίροις, ὦ χαρᾶς τῆς σωτηρίου μητρόπολις·
 χαίροις, ὦ χαρᾶς τῆς ἀθανάτου παραίτιε·
 χαίροις, ὦ χαρᾶς τῆς ἀλέκτου μυστικὸν καταγώγιον·

κ.τ.λ.

τίς σου φράσαι τὴν ἀγλαΐαν δυνήσεται;
 τίς σου φάναι τὸ θαῦμα τολμήσειε;
 τίς σου κηρύξαι θαρσῆσει τὸ μέγεθος;⁵¹

κ.τ.λ.

2. εἰ οὖν τὸ πατρικὸν αὐτοῦ θέλημα πράξοιμεν (x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
 πίστιν ἀληθῆ καὶ ὀρθόδοξον ἔχοντες, (x ~ ~ x ~ ~)
 καὶ τὴν Ἰσραηλιτικὴν ῥομφαίαν ἀμβλύνοιμεν
 καὶ τὴν Σαρακηνικὴν ἀποστρέψοιμεν μάχαιραν
 καὶ τόξον τὸ Ἀγαρικὸν κατεάξοιμεν
 καὶ τὴν ἱερὰν Βηθλεὲμ οὐκ εἰς μακρὰν θεασοίμεθα
 καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ κατοπτεύσοιμεν θαύματα
 καὶ τὸν θαυματουργὸν αὐτὸν Χριστὸν εἰσαθρήσαιμεν
 καὶ σὺν ἀγγέλοις αὐτῷ τὴν ὑμνωδίαν βοήσαιμεν. . . .⁵²

The first piece, from a homily for the Feast of the Annunciation, is close in spirit and function to the χαιρετισμός of the *Akathistos*, enhancing the sense of excitement at the announcement and celebrating the amazing role of Mary in the divine plan. The second piece, though less imposing in form and more mundane in spirit, will nevertheless support the point under discussion. It comes from a sermon on the Nativity, delivered in Jerusalem at Christmas of the year 634, a few years before the defiant city fell to the Arab conquerors. Here the patriarch Sophronius lists a series of happy events that will result if the Christian citizens follow God's will and keep the orthodox faith. The polysyndetic string can be said to add a tone of solemnity and confidence to his pronouncements.

The last element of Climacus's style chosen for comment is drama, and once more it is worth bearing in mind both the *kontakion* genre and the writings of Sophronius of Jerusalem. It is generally recognized that vivid dialogue, lively questions, and dramatization are prominent among the stylistic marks of sixth- and seventh-century hymns.⁵³ Sophronius too very often enlivens his sermons with hymnodic touches—litany-like rep-

⁵¹ PG 87.3:3237.

⁵² *RhM* 41.3 (1886): 508.28–509.3.

⁵³ See *ODB* 2:960; and Maas and Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi cantica*, xxii.

etitions (as seen above), refrains, strings of pointed questions, and re-creations of dramatic scenes complete with dialogue, such as the first encounter between Christ and John the Baptist (in his sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany)⁵⁴ or the appearance of the archangel Gabriel to Mary (in the sermon for the Feast of the Annunciation).⁵⁵

In the *Ladder* also there are a number of passages of dramatic intensity, none more emotional than the fifth chapter, on Repentance, whose major scene is set in a monastery not far from Alexandria. Climacus had gone to pass some time there and during his stay learned of a special section, known as “The Prison” (Φυλακή), about a mile distant from the main community, where erring monks were sent for penitence. Granted permission to see it, the author spent a month with the inmates, and he includes an account of his experiences in the fifth step. It is certainly the strangest part of the work, and easily the most moving. Climacus is well aware of that; like a Moses addressing the Israelites, he says to the audience of his book, “Come gather around, listen here and I will speak to all of you who have angered the Lord. Crowd around me and see what he has revealed to my soul for your edification.”⁵⁶ What follows is a veritable visit to the underworld, with a catalog, in gruesome detail, of self-inflicted misery, deprivation, and punishment. With the visitor we see the harrowing sights and hear the groans and anguished questions of the tormented. Some sense of the account is conveyed by a few brief citations: “I saw some of those accused yet innocent men stand all night until dawn in the open air, their feet never moving, pitifully pounded by the natural urge to sleep, giving themselves no rest, reproaching themselves, driving sleep away with abuse and insults”;⁵⁷ and later: “Others sat in sackcloth and ashes on the ground, hiding their faces between their knees, striking the earth with their foreheads. Others constantly beat their breasts, recalling their past lives and the conditions of their souls. Some shed their tears on the ground, while others, unable to weep, struck themselves. Some raised over their own souls a lament for the dead, since the strength to bear their heart’s grief had left them. Others moaned inwardly, stifling the sounds of their wailing until, unable to bear it any longer, they would suddenly cry out.”⁵⁸ Or again: “You could see the tongues on some of them dry and hanging from their mouths in the manner of dogs. Some punished themselves in the blazing sun, others tortured themselves in the cold, while others, again, drank only as much water as would keep them from dying of thirst.”⁵⁹ So the catalog goes on relentlessly, page after page, and ends appropriately on a supercharged note—the scene played out whenever an inmate was about to die. The others gathered around their brother in his final hour, while his mind was still working, and plied him with eager queries: How was he feeling? What were his hopes and expectations? Had he achieved what he had worked so hard for, or was his struggle a failure? Had he been given any kind of assurance or was he still uncertain in his hopes? And finally: “Can you say anything to us,

⁵⁴A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, ed., *Ἀνάλεκτα Ἱεροσολυμιτικῆς σταχυολογίας* (St. Petersburg, 1898; repr. Brussels, 1963), 5:151–68, esp. 154.

⁵⁵PG 87.3:3217–88, esp. 3237.

⁵⁶Trevisan, 1:207.

⁵⁷Ibid., 209.

⁵⁸Ibid., 209–11.

⁵⁹Ibid., 215.

brother? Please tell us, so that we may know how it will be for us. Your time is over and you will never have another chance.”⁶⁰

Climacus’s considerable flair for the dramatic manifests itself in another connection that is of double interest, since it has a bearing on the question of structure within the work as well. With the eighth chapter starts a series of steps that begin to pay particular attention to the passions or vices. In the eighth step, Anger comes to the forefront. At the beginning of the ninth step, on Malice, the author makes an important statement, which speaks directly to his effort to maintain a certain order in presentation: “The holy virtues are like the ladder of Jacob and the unholy vices are like the chain that fell from the chief apostle Peter. The virtues lead from one to another and carry heavenward the man who chooses them. Vices, on the other hand, beget and stifle one another.”⁶¹ The chain mentioned here refers to the shackles that fell off Peter when he was released dramatically from Herod’s prison by an angel,⁶² and it is introduced now as a device to link the series of vices, in the special sense of the family link. What this amounts to is, in effect, that for the whole middle portion of the thirty steps—meaning chapters 8 to 23 where the passions are highlighted—there are two structural metaphors at work, namely, the ladder of virtues and the chain or family of vices; and of the two, it is the family notion that controls, at least rhetorically, the sequence of chapters in this central section.

For some of these steps Climacus goes a degree further. In short scenes at the end of five chapters, he presents several of the major passions in the dramatic role of the tyrant (τύραννος); he produces the characterization for Anger, Despondency, Gluttony, Lust, and Insensitivity. The main purpose of the highly figurative exercise, apart from its usefulness for the structure, is to teach the causes and cures of the passions, and do so in a vivid and memorable way. Adhering more or less to the same general pattern in each instance, the staging is as follows. The tyrant in question, for example, Anger (Θυμός) in the eighth step, is hauled in chains before a tribunal and forced, under rough interrogation, not only to provide the names of his parents (i.e., causes) and relatives, but also to reveal, against himself, the identity of his enemies (i.e., cures). In the case of Anger, the subject is sufficiently intimidated to supply the information without much of a struggle. Appearing in the fourteenth step, the female tyrant Gluttony (Γαστριμαργία) is, by comparison, more recalcitrant and defiant; she does catalog her relatives, but warns at the end, “The thought of death is my enemy always, but there is nothing human that can really wipe me out.”⁶³

Lust is the passion highlighted in the fifteenth step, and it provides the occasion for a dramatic episode of a special kind. The role of the demon of Lust, for the purposes of the tribunal showdown, is played by the tyrant of the body, and the casting leads to a very interesting confrontation, taking the form of a schizoid struggle within the narrator/interrogator himself. Throughout the fifteenth step Climacus is depicting vividly the never-ending war waged over chastity—the war between the two natures, the angelic and the material—and the efforts of the spirit to tame and conquer the tyrant of the

⁶⁰Ibid., 223–25.

⁶¹Ibid., 303.

⁶²Acts 12:7.

⁶³Trevisan, 1:355.

body. At the same time there is a clear recognition that it is a war in part between friends, since body and soul are inseparable, if uneasy, partners. By the end of the step the conflicting feelings have reached a high pitch of emotional intensity. Before the interrogator can directly confront the tyrant to extract the secret of how he might be conquered, before the dialogue of soul and body can occur, the soul, or mind, must face certain questions within itself. How can it tie up this body, this friend, and treat it like the other tyrants? “Before I can bind him he is let loose, before I can condemn him I am reconciled to him, before I can punish him I bow down to him and feel sorry for him. How can I hate him, when my nature disposes me to love him? How can I break away from him, when I am bound to him forever? How can I do away with him when he is going to be resurrected with me? How can I make him incorrupt when he has received a corruptible nature?”⁶⁴ These are the contradictions and divisions, and the split in emotions is further heightened by the conciseness of the phrases that follow, until at the end the struggle subsides, for the moment, into three questions that may produce quiescence but not an answer: “What is this mystery surrounding me? What is the meaning of this mixture that I am? How can I be to myself both an enemy and a friend?”⁶⁵ Here is the central portion in the original:

πῶς μισήσω ὃν φύσει ἀγαπᾶν πέφυκα;
 πῶς ἐλευθερωθῶ ᾧ εἰς αἰῶνας συνδέδεμαι;
 πῶς καταργήσω τὸ καὶ σὺν ἐμοὶ ἀνιστάμενον;
 πῶς δείξω ἄφθαρτον τὸ φθαρτὴν εἰληφὸς φύσιν;
 τί εὐλογον εἶπω τῷ τὰ εὐλόγια κεκτημένῳ διὰ τῆς φύσεως;

 καὶ γὰρ καὶ σύνεργός ἐστι καὶ πολέμιος
 καὶ βοηθὸς καὶ ἀντίδικος
 καὶ ἀντιλήπτωρ καὶ ἐπίβουλος·
 θεραπευόμενος πολεμεῖ
 καὶ τηκόμενος ἀτονεῖ,
 ἀναπαυόμενος ἀτακτεῖ
 καὶ σαινόμενος οὐ φέρει.
 ἂν λυπήσω
 ὅλως κινδυνεύσω,
 ἂν πλήξω
 οὐκ ἔχω διὰ τίνος τὰς ἀρετὰς κτήσομαι·
 τὸν αὐτὸν καὶ ἀποστρέφομαι καὶ περιπτύσσομαι.
 τί τὸ περὶ ἐμὲ μυστήριον;
 τίς ὁ λόγος τῆς ἐμῆς συγκράσεως;
 πῶς ἐαυτῷ ἐχθρὸς καὶ φίλος καθέστηκε;

The section of the *Ladder* examined above is appropriate for bringing to a close the discussion of selected stylistic features in Climacus, because it exhibits all of the elements focused on here: it has bits of rhythm and snatches of poetic phrasing, there are parts in litany-like arrangement, and the dramatic quality is pervasive and undeniable.

The following can be said by way of general conclusion: There were essentially two things that I set out to accomplish in this article. The first was to restore some clarity to

⁶⁴ Ibid., 401.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

the original rhetorical context of *The Heavenly Ladder's* composition and presentation, with the following result: if fuller account is taken of the front and back material—the exchange of letters and the “Homily to the Pastor”—the figure of Moses emerges as an element of some importance in the overall scheme of things. And if it were someday shown that the original title of the *Ladder* was in fact Πλάκες πνευματικάι, that would be but a fitting capstone, since there is already enough real Mosaic presence in the *Ladder* and in the transmitted documents surrounding it to give to the treatise the tone of a set of inspired guidelines. The image of Moses also helps, from the reader's point of view, to take pressure off the ladder concept as the organizing device; in conjunction with the concept of the chain of vices, it makes us realize that the ladder idea was never meant to carry the full burden of the work's structure by itself. For just as the appearance of multiple, sometimes protean, metaphors is a notable feature of individual passages within the work, so too is it a vital element of the Climacus's general aesthetics of presentation.⁶⁶

The second objective was to focus on the author's manner of writing. Here three features were singled out for examination, and an effort was made to suggest a literary affinity based on those elements of style, or, in other words, to identify a style context. The genre of the *kontakion* and the prose sermons of Sophronius of Jerusalem were brought forward as exhibiting a kindred spirit—as compositions in which similar types of artistic strategy were employed to embellish the writing and heighten the experience of the reader or auditor. If this is an accurate association, it should be made clear at the same time that no claims are being made about any direct influence of these writings on each other. Rather, I am suggesting that the rhetorical character of Climacus's work, while retaining its own individual stamp, would seem to place it squarely within a particular tradition of Greek Christian writing.⁶⁷ We know too little about the facts of John Climacus's career to say anything concrete about his rhetorical training, but wherever he received it, whether inside or outside the monastery, he surely put it to good use, since the single book he wrote is at once a classic of spiritual wisdom and a fascinating, albeit challenging, work of literature.

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⁶⁶From another point of view, as Alice-Mary Talbot has reminded me, the story of Moses and the *Ladder* share the theme of ascent.

⁶⁷That tradition in turn might well represent a regional style within the Greek-speaking part of the Byzantine Empire. At any rate, its origins are commonly held to lie in the East and it is said to reflect specifically Syriac modes of composition. See C. von Schönborn, *Sophrone de Jérusalem: Vie monastique et confession dogmatique* (Paris, 1972), 102–3; Maas and Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi cantica*, xii–xiii, for *kontakia*. Petit too (“Jean Climaque,” 692), commenting briefly on Climacus's style, mentions the “school of Antioch” in this connection. The question would merit further exploration by someone competent in both Greek and Syriac literature.